



Pick Your Path to Health

What is the One Sure Sign of Spring for You?

By Cathy McCarthy
Anishinaabe - Metis (Non-status)

I asked my friend this question on the phone the other day. She lives on a Rez up north, where the snow and ice don't melt until well into May. "The smell of burning grass," she said and then proceeded to tell me about the Burning Grass ceremony that our people, the Odawa, celebrate every year. She told me that throughout the community, families gather to bless the earth and burn off last year's dead grass so that the new grass will find the sun.

Although my friend and I share a common culture, a lot of my upbringing was in the city where burning grass was not allowed. My sure sign of spring was when the city workers would dynamite the ice on the river to start it moving up into the St. Lawrence. This was high entertainment in my family and we celebrated with a tailgate picnic on the shore.

When I told my friend this, she laughed and said, "Same thing eh."

Many of us, especially at this time of year, would like to see spring take hold in our hearts and in the hearts of those who are important to us. But sometimes it just seems like it is impossible to shake loose from winter's icy grip.

As Indian women, we know that everything is related with everything else. So a heavy heart, sadness, and depression are signs of the bigger disturbances surrounding us. Many of these disturbances are beyond our abilities to fix. Many more lie in the poverty of body and spirit that follow us everyday. And while we may not be able to change these things quickly, we do control our response to them.

In the spirit of being in control of the response, here are some possible ways to start burning the grass and dynamiting the ice to get things moving toward spring.

From the outset it is important to acknowledge that our strength lies in the power of family and community. At the center of this power is women's wisdom and deeds. We are the ones who make things happen. We are the ones who can improve our situations.

The old way of dealing with an issue was to gather all who were affected by it in a talking or healing circle. Everyone had a chance to speak and all opinions and points of view were weighed in offering a solution to the problem. When an answer was finally decided upon, it was something everyone could agree with.

Today the talking circle and the healing circle concepts are again being used in both city and reservation settings to help solve a variety of problems. You could even argue that it is another one of those Indian traditions that has been co-opted into mainstream health care, where it's called "Group Therapy."

So one way to start the grass burning might be to organize a healing circle of friends and family for a loved one; or maybe join one that is already going strong at the local community center or tribal health facility. It is always hard at first to entrust strong feelings and emotions to other people, but this might be all that is needed to start the fire.

If you have access to the Internet either at home or through a local library, school, or community center, you might want to check out the White Bison Inc. Web site at: <http://www.whitebison.org>.

White Bison is an American Indian owned non-profit organization dedicated to bringing the message of sobriety and physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness to Native communities. They provide information on organizing healing circles and wellbriety programs in your community. This year they are focusing on healing Native women and children through the "Sacred Hoop Journey III." White Bison has also created its own healing circle in the form of discussion groups and an online chat room. If you don't have access to the Internet, you or your organization can contact them for written materials at:

White Bison, Inc.
6145 Lehman Dr. Suite 200
Colorado Springs, CO, 80918
Phone: 719-548-1000
Fax: 719-548 9407

If something a little more proactive, like dynamite, is needed to get things rolling again, you may want to think about seeking professional help.

In the past, the only kind of professional help people could afford was the emergency room, and that only as a last resort. If you did manage to see a

mental health care worker, chances were that he or she didn't have a clue about treating Indian people.

Nowadays, the situation has greatly improved. It is becoming more common for Indian community centers in the city and for tribal organizations and health care facilities on the Rez to have a Native counselor on staff. These people are there either to provide culturally sensitive counseling themselves, or guide patients to the right services. Often, the Native counselor is already working with local social workers and psychologists to set up support systems that speak to the culture and experience of the Native community. So chances are, anyone starting their search for services at these places will be pointed in the right direction.

Whether you or someone close to you needs to burn off a little grass or dynamite some thick ice, there is somewhere safe out there for doing it. All it takes is a phone call to the right person or a visit to the right place.

Here are some Internet links and contact information for Native American Mental Health Services.

United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY)

<http://www.unityinc.org>

Mailing address: P.O. Box 800

Oklahoma City, OK 73101

Physical address: 500 N. Broadway, Suite 250

Oklahoma City, OK 73102

Tel. 405-236-2800

Fax 405-971-1071

Healing of the Nations

<http://www.healingofthenations.com>

37688 Tulaby Lake Drive

Waubun, MN 56589

Tel. 218-743-2298

American Indian Health Council

<http://members.tripod.com/~AIHC1998/index.html>

Voice Mail: 818-464-6852 ext.1127

Fax: 561-619-6353

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign,

*please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the
National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/>
To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click
Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*